

Jennifer Brier, Jim Downs, and Jennifer L. Morgan, eds. *Connexions: Histories of Race and Sex in North America* (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2016). 316 pp. Cloth \$95.00, Paperback \$30.00.

*Connexions: Histories of Race and Sex in North America* sets ambitious goals. First, it integrates interdisciplinary queer and feminist theory into US history. Secondly, it raises provocative questions rather than answering straightforward historical inquiries. Most importantly, the authors “[reimagine] the larger arc of American history by making race and sexuality the focus.” This is intended to inspire all historians, but especially those of Early America and American slavery, to consider sex in their own work (3). Anyone versed in the history of sexuality will likely find this text successful at its project, although historians attached to using traditional archives of primary sources may need more convincing. In the first chapter, Jim Downs succinctly offers a methodological solution in the face of limited material evidence when he asks, “can theory take the place of evidence?” (29). A reader’s gut reaction to this question, as excitement or skepticism, may determine their response to the book at large. Downs’s work, along with many of the other pieces in *Connexions*, suggests that going beyond the constraints of material evidence can produce necessary and exciting views of the past.

The emphasis on innovation and provocation begins with the book’s title. *Connexions* is not a typo, but a reference to a nineteenth-century euphemism for illicit sexual contact. A few examples from medical and legal records of the time suggest the term encompassed adultery, venereal disease, and interracial sex. Jennifer Brier, Jim Downs, and Jennifer L. Morgan suggest such an antiquated word might be re-evaluated by scholars in this century to approach the “multiplicities,” or complex interactions between sex and other social constructions (2). Although the word “intersectionality” appears scantily in the remaining chapters, it offers a broad opening to interpret intersections between race and sex in different ways. As a result, the subsequent chapters are theoretically as well as topically diverse. While this leaves the reader with fewer firm conclusions about the qualitative relationship between race and sex, the broad scope is effective at raising new questions for a wider curious audience.

The chapters are divided into three sections: “Deep Connections,” “Beauty and Desire,” and “Subjectivities.” However, so many of the works engage with subjectivity and connection that the divisions do little to orient the reader. The first chapters by Downs and Julian B. Carter set the tone for a collection seriously committed to centring Black and queer subjects. The middle section on “Beauty and Desire” raises the most cohesive set of questions around the role of race in discourse on desire, especially when dominant groups spun conflicting narratives about the beauty and/or inadequacy of non-white bodies. The attention to visibility, bod-

ies, and media plays to the existing source strengths of Early America. Whereas the other essays try to tell new stories in the absence of documented evidence, essays by Sharon Block and Stephanie M.H. Camp, and Brian Connolly in section three, consider vast sets of more traditional sources in seeking new conclusions that others have missed. These chapters would be invaluable to scholars less familiar with the field of sexuality studies, but open to incorporating new questions without a dramatic shift in their own methods.

The most compelling chapters have a more biographical focus, notably those written by Marisa J. Fuentes, Ernesto Chávez, Jim Downs, and Wanda S. Pillow, which allow for more concrete questions about how individuals of colour navigated sexuality. In these chapters, race was not a straightforward determinant of power or social positioning. In Chávez's "The Soul of the Boy Was ... Aztec," film star Ramon Novarro's self-fashioning to American audiences is recast as an act of agency to improve public perception of Mexicans (136). Jim Downs tells a story of two black veterans of the Civil War in love and seeking reunification, though records generated by white observers describe them as pitiful and "disgusting" (27). By reading widely across records addressing black and white male sexuality, Downs suggests words like "filthy" and "disgusting" in this period may have signalled same-sex sex (21). Fuentes and Pillow break down the mythology surrounding much earlier figures: black brothel owner Rachael Pringle Polgreen of Barbados, and York and Sacajawea of the famed Lewis and Clark Expedition, whose sexualized depictions in travelogues deserve more critical dissection than previous scholars have done. This more biographical, single-subject approach produces more thrilling, if more contestable, configurations of what might have been, and keeps the collection appropriately grounded in human vulnerability.

This collection hits its targets precisely, highlighting the scholarship possible on sex and race, the utility of contemporary theoretical frames for historians of sexuality, and the pervasive historical influence of slavery on racism in the United States. However, a glaring inconsistency will likely leave readers wondering. Although the title is *Connexions: Histories of Race and Sex in North America*, "North America" mostly means the United States and colonial America. Fuentes' chapter, "Power and Historical Figuring: Rachael Pringle Polgreen's Troubled Archive" was the only piece set wholly outside of the geographic US. Its alignment with the collection's themes makes it an essential inclusion but brings further attention to the shortcoming of this collection as mostly focused on US history. With such a carefully framed introduction in every other regard, this conflation of North America and the United States was disappointing. A more transnational array of essays, exemplified by Chávez's analysis of Novarro's celebrity persona, might further extend the readership. Otherwise, a clearer allegiance to the US field, as is apparent in many individual chapters, would probably make this book more marketable to the implied audience. The chapters, especially in the final "Subjectivities" section, could have also benefited from some chronological division so that wonderful chapters on twentieth

century history like Carter's "Historical Methods and Racial Identification in US Lesbian and Gay History" do not get buried by equally important, but very different, pieces on early America.

*Connexions* offers an easy opening to scholars new to the history of sexuality and historically rigorous suggestions for how race, sex, and power have intersected, and continue to intersect. This text would prove especially valuable to non-historians curious about how historians employ theory. Applying theory to a material past—what was rather than what might be—complicates but can ultimately strengthen theoretical frameworks constructed in the present moment. Historians hoping to engage with contemporary issues should take heed from interdisciplinary work such as this.

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